

**Charge to Phi Beta Kappa Student Initiates  
Baylor University, Spring 2011  
By: Dr. James W. Vardaman**

It has been my privilege to hear a large assortment of “charges” delivered to students during my forty-six years of teaching. Frankly, many of them have been rather bombastic and all embracing. It all too often seemed that speakers were inclined to declare “Never mind your questions, here’s the answer!” Please relax! I am not going to hurl another verbal boulder at you tonight. Instead, you are going to get a few pebbles tossed lightly in your direction.

I hope you won’t need to listen as an act of penance with glazed eyes or badly suppressed yawns, interspersed with stealthy glances at your watches [or iphones]. I’ve been both witness and participant all too often in my career to wish to inflict any more pain on your innocent heads.

What I do intend is to pass along a thin bundle of thoughts I have collected during my years of teaching college students. This distillation of twenty-three statements—is an average of one for every two years of instruction. Indeed there were many others but most were cast aside and only those which seemed best to me survived. I don’t recall the source of some of them. Most of the ones retained are not earth shaking but quite simple and brief, with one exception. I do not presume or necessarily expect that you will agree with all or any. I humbly request that you think about some of them. Then dismiss them if there is no appeal. They possess value for me. I would be keenly sorry if there is none for you.

So here they are:

The wayfarer, perceiving the pathway to truth, / Was struck with astonishment. / It was thickly grown with weeds. / "Ha," he said, "I see that none has passed here in a long time." / Later he saw that each weed / Was a singular knife. / "Well," he mumbled at last, / "Doubtless there are other roads." Stephen Crane

There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries. *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, scene 3, Shakespeare

Experience: He marched out of Berlin with the king and participated in forty battles over seven years, and with all his "experience" did not understand any more at the end of it when he returned to the capital than he had at the beginning when he had departed. Frederick the Great's Mule

Arrogance is the father of stupidity.

You are looking at the problem!! (on my mirror)

**Time is the best teacher. Unfortunately it kills all its pupils. Hector Berlioz**

**Every great idea has its origin in heresy. George Bernard Shaw**

**After you have encountered a wasp, don't you love a fly. John Mortimer**

**Beware of analogy: because a cat has kittens in an oven doesn't make 'em biscuits.**

**Where books are burned, they will in the end burn people, too. Heinrich Heine**

**Be kind because everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle. Philo of Alexandria**

**The characteristics of an educated Christian should be a cold eye and a warm heart.**

**It may be that our only hope will lie in the frail web of understanding of one person for the pain of another. John Dos Passos**

**It is a deadly mistake to assume that the words "critic" and "enemy" are interchangeable terms.**

**Today a rooster; tomorrow a feather duster. Australian Proverb**

**Men never do evil so fully and so happily as when they do it for conscience sake.  
Pascal**

**The wise are heard through their silence. Lao Tsu**

**I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends. Abraham Lincoln**

**Remember that in every Eden there is probably a snake.**

**An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth--and soon the world is blind and toothless.  
Gandhi**

**Be more than you seem. Helmuth von Moltke "The Elder"**

**A Paris newspaper's six successive headlines reporting Napoleon's escape from his exile on Elba in 1815:**

**"The Corsican Monster Has Landed in the Gulf of Juan."**

**"The Cannibal is Marching Toward Grasse."**

**"The Usurper Has Entered Grenoble."**

**"Bonaparte Has Entered Lyons."**

**"Napoleon Is Marching Towards Fontainebleau."**

**"His Imperial Majesty Is Expected Tomorrow in Paris."**

**You probably did not count them, but I only listed twenty-two. I deliberately omitted the one statement because it has come to have very special meaning of late and I would like, with your permission, to tell you why.**

**About three months ago and within the same week, I received two books as gifts—one from a friend in Kentucky and the other from a friend in San Antonio. They do not know one another. Strangely, both volumes were biographies about the same man. That man was a remarkable German Christian named Dietrich Bonhöffer. One of the authors was Eric Metaxas, an American. The other was a German, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen. I really knew little about Bonhöffer, except his declaration which I previously omitted: I now quote it: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”—a hard, unvarnished and uncompromising challenge if there ever was one!**

**I took the opportunity to read the two magisterial biographies and to discover for myself what Bonhöffer exactly meant by his demanding, compelling, and all-inclusive statement. Soon I discovered that he was possessed of staggering talent. While at the justly renowned University of Berlin, he studied under a galaxy of preeminent professors—among them, Adolf Von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg. While holding them in awe and great respect, Bonhöffer had no hesitation in contradicting and debating with them on any and all issues. He consistently astonished them with his learning and perception.**

**Bonhöffer had read broadly and passionately since childhood. In addition to classical and German literature (he will go to his death with a copy of Goethe in his possession), he was engrossed in history, art, music (he was an accomplished pianist), science, languages, and theology. In short his intellectual endowments were breathtaking! Beyond things of the mind, he was positively marinated in all the basic virtues that a mortal could wish for.**

**Despite his great gifts, he was humble, kind, loving, devout and obedient. False pride was an abomination and he was always willing to aid any person, be he high or low if Bonhöffer had the resources to do so. Admiration for him seemed limitless from those who came to know him.**

**However, despite his devotion and rich commitment to life—after deep reflection and searching prayer, Bonhöffer took the most radical step of his life; he joined the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He concluded the Nazi leader was evil to the point of depravity and thus must be destroyed to prevent his continuous assault on life, religion and the basic values of humanitarian civilization.**

**Bonhöffer reached the crucial decision that it was not sufficient to stand aside and hope that others would hazard the fateful deed. The only way to prevent this pathological monster from continuing his insidious brutality was for decent people to dedicate every fiber to the eradication of such a reprehensible tyrant. Thus, Bonhöffer became implicated beyond recall. All too soon his activity was exposed. He**

was arrested and after long months of incarceration was hanged at Flossenbürg prison in the early hours of April 9, 1945.

Little is known about the last agonizing days of his life. However two pieces of evidence have emerged long after Bonhöffer's death from two witnesses who hardly knew him. One was written by a British officer who was a Prisoner of War, Captain S. Payne Best. I quote: "Bonhöffer was quite calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at ease—his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison. I don't suppose I spoke to him more than three times. He told me how happy prison made him [because] he had always been afraid that he would not be strong enough to stand such a test but now he knew there was nothing in life of which one should ever be afraid [including death]. He was cheerful and apparently free of care. Without exception he was the finest and most loveable man I ever met!" For him there was only one reality and Christ was Lord over all of it or none [and that was that].

The other scrap of evidence came from the camp doctor at Flossenbürg, H. Fischer-Hüllstrung. He had no idea whom he was watching at the time, but years later he gave his account of Bonhöffer's last moments alive: I quote: "On the morning of April 9, 1945, between five and six o'clock the [condemned] prisoners were taken from their cells—Through the half-opened door in one room I saw this man [later identified as Dietrich Bonhöffer] kneeling on the floor, praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer.

At the place of execution he again said a short prayer then climbed the steps to the [hangman's] gallows, brave and composed. His death came [shortly thereafter]. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

Winston Churchill once speculated on which of man's virtues was the greatest. He concluded that it must be courage because without that quality all the others became useless.

I submit that Dietrich Bonhöffer claimed that dominant virtue in company with all the others, so as to shine through eternity. Thus the 23<sup>rd</sup> quotation: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." And so Bonhöffer did!!!!

Thank you and may the sun shine eternally for you and may the wind always be at your backs. Good luck and God bless you all, now and forevermore.